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ABSTRACT

Is the superhero that preschool children emulate and dramatize in their play qualitatively different from the heroes of children in the past? To answer this question, data were gathered (1) from a historical review of the literature on children's play and their heroes and (2) from a survey questionnaire completed by 100 subjects stratified to represent distinct periods in time. Study results indicated: (1) significantly more heroic adventure play in early childhood as reported by post-TV age groups; (2) significantly more fantasy heroes as favorite characters from this same age group; and (3) that friends, siblings, and parents' occupations dropped as key sources for fantasy heroes as the media, including television, rose as a primary source of information about favorite heroes. Before TV, preschool children engaged in dramatic roles patterned after those adults they were close to and wished to model. Most often, these models were family members and other "real" people of the community, such as teachers, store clerks, firemen, and nurses. In middle childhood, after about 8 years of age, children moved from modeling known, predictable people to playing out adventure themes with more distant, fantasy characters, such as cowboys, army personnel, cops, and robbers. Descriptive statistics provide additional information on types of play, favorite characters, and salient qualities of heroes from the sample population. (RH)

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A Historical Study of Children's Play and Exploratory Play

by

Judy French, Ph.D.

June 1987

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Abstract

Children's Heroes and Fantasy Play

Is the superhero preschool age children choose to emulate and dramatize in their play, qualitatively different from the heroes of past childhoods? In order to answer this question, data were gathered from a historical review of the literature on how children have played and who their heroes were and from a survey questionnaire completed by 100 subjects stratified to represent distinct periods in time. Results from the study revealed: 1) Significantly more heroic adventure play in early childhood as reported by post-TV age groups; 2) significantly more fantasy heroes as favorite characters from this same age group; 3) as media, including television , rose as a primary source of information about favorite heroes, friends, siblings and parents' occupation dropped as key sources. Descriptive statistics gives additional information on types of play, favorite characters and salient qualities of heroes from the sample population.

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Observations of preschool children's play reveal an increase in dramatization of superhero themes (French, Pena & Holmes, 1987; Sousa & Schneiderman, 1986; Kostelnik, Whiren & Stein, 1986; Paley, 1984; Singer & Singer, 1981; Jennings & Gillis-Olion, 1980). Television programming of superhero cartoons has increased at a meteoric rate since the epochal step in the marriage of the toy industry and television of the mid-1970's. As of 1985, there were nine superhero cartoon programs on television (National Coalition of Television Violence, Press Release: November 26, 1985). For each of the cartoon programs, plastic action hero toys and accessories could be purchased. Television has changed the course of the toy industry. Until the mid-1970's, as many as 70% of all toys sold at retail each year were sold during the six weeks before Christmas (Owen, 1986). Today, Christmas sales account for only about half of the year's toy business (Owen, 1986). Television superhero programming, along with the reinforcement of toy action figures, may be contributing to the increase in children's dramatization of superhero themes.

Concern arises as to social values conveyed to young children through the new "Super Hero." Parents and teachers question the amount of aggression, the use of weapons and the frightening characterizations on the programs. Preschool teachers, in particular, debate the benefits versus the negative outcomes of children playing imaginative dramatizations with superhero themes

while modeling aggressive, stereotypic qualities of popular characters. Parents lament the commercialization of the program that results in children begging to purchase the toy action figures and accompanying paraphernalia. Yet, adults familiar with the program content and observant of children playing superheroes, inevitably make the comment, "When I was young, (Roy Rogers) was one of my heroes, and I'm not violent. Is this really any different from the way I played as a child?"

The main goal of this study was to address the following question:

--- Is the contemporary hero that children choose to emulate and dramatize in their fantasy play qualitatively different from the hero(s) of past childhoods?

Specifically, this study provided data relating to the following questions:

--- Who were children's heroes and models in past childhoods?

--- What qualities did these models exemplify?

--- What ages preferred dramatizing hero play?

--- What specific social forces influenced the choices and qualities of heroes?

Data collection consisted of a current review of the literature on superhero programs and play; a historical review of the literature on children's play forms and heroes from approximately 1900 to 1975; and a questionnaire on how present adults, aged 17 to 80, played as children.

CURRENT RESEARCH

Superhero Programs and Characters

An analysis of superhero programs, such as He-Man and Masters of the Universe, She-Ra: Princess of Power, Transformers, Gobots, Thundercats and G.I. Joe reveal similar patterns in program format (French, Pena & Holmes, 1987; National Coalition on Television Violence, 1985). Heroes typically deal with conflict through the use of power and force. They have highly specialized, technological weapons or magical powers with which they overcome opposition. The acts of aggression per episode range from 10 to 42 per half-hour (National Coalition on Television Violence, 1985). Both male and female characters have stereotypic sex roles and exaggerated sex attributes. The evil characters have dark or oddly-colored skin and may look like mutants with many eyes or claws for hands. There are forces or "hordes" of evil characters that outnumber the good characters. The settings often depict other worlds and future time. The programming is characterized by fast-paced action, frequent changes in scenes and characters and repetitive musical phrases accompanied by color flashes and increase in volume.

In one study, 30 four and five year olds were interviewed as to their understanding of the characters, plot, concept of power and moral theme of a particular He-Man show. French, Pena & Holmes (1987) found that although nearly all the children verbalized that the TV characters were pretend, when interviewed about who they would go to for help in various situations, given a choice of

parents, teachers, or superheroes, superheroes ranked high or higher than parents and teachers. Children in both age groups were equally divided as to whether both boys and girls could be a favorite male character. Children were surprisingly able to repeat the story sequence and understand the plot even with the many convolutions of story line, scene and character. When asked what power was, children's definitions were limited to aspects of muscles and might. Magic was occasionally included in their definitions. They did not understand the moral themes of the shows, even though the moral message is delivered at the end of the show. Younger children said it meant, "Goodbye, come another day." Older children recognized the tone of the message and said it meant, "Be nice and share."

Jennings and Gillis-Olion (1980) interviewed 65 kindergarten children about their TV viewing habits, favorite cartoon characters and analyzed the program content for violence, sexism and racism. Superfriends ranked high in program preference for boys, but not for girls. When asked if they would like to be like their favorite TV character, 85% of the children said, "Yes." The responses as to why they desired to be like their favorite superfriend were categorized as strength and might. The analysis of the cartoon shows for violence, sexism and racism revealed extremely violent cartoon programs with subtle elements of racism and sexism. Violence was the major avenue of problem solving in the cartoons viewed. When asked about TV programs least preferred, the subjects listed the news, cowboys, movies and scary pictures.

Fernie (1980) interviewed 70 kindergarten and elementary age boys to determine their understanding of reality versus fantasy with TV characterizations. Results revealed that across age, children believe that unrealistic characters are unique and that real people and realistic characters are similar to each other. Age differences in the particular ways children saw superheroes as being different were found. While boys in all age groups described superheroes as unrealistic in their physical abilities, younger children extended their uniqueness to other types of attributes. Young children often stated that superheroes could live forever, did not need to sleep, never hurt people, or never felt badly.

Fernie (1980) concluded that since many of these attributes were unexpressed in programs or difficult to portray, it appears that younger children imaginatively conflate superhero's physical abilities with other attributes, and thus, have an idealized conception of these characters.

Cohen (1977) speculates that television programming techniques of fast pacing, repetition, loud music and flashing colors may interfere with normal perceptual development of young children. She defines perceptual learning as the extraction or pulling out of relevant information from available stimulation. When the child experiences sensory overload, the normal perceptual process of focusing, ordering and extracting information may be at risk.

Superhero Adventure Play

Observations of preschool children playing superheroes confirm television research on the modeling effect of television viewing

(French, Pena & Holmes, 1987); Sousa and Schneiderman, 1986; Paley, 1984; Singer & Singer, 1981; Jennings & Gillis-Olion, 1980).

In order to observe children playing superheroes in a controlled setting, French, Pena & Holmes (1987) designed a "superhero camp." Eight, four and five year olds were invited to play with superhero action figures for 1½ hours over a five day period. The first two days, the two teacher-observers did not intervene unless someone was in imminent danger of being hurt. Superhero play was loud, active and quickly escalated to threatening behavior. Children repeated television phrases such as, "By the power of Greyskull!" and rhythmically chanted, "He-Man, He-Man." The toy action figures were crashed together and used to knock down block structures. Capes were donned and children dashed about the room disrupting the concentration of other children. During the next two days, the observers sat in the area where play was taking place and focused the play by asking questions such as, "Where does Skeletor sleep?"

On the third day, one episode of sociodramatic play did take place. The groups divided into two "families," built block homes for the "good guys" and the "bad guys," and ended the episode by inviting each other for dinner. This was the only sociodramatic play episode in five days that lasted fifteen minutes or longer. In general, the presence of the teacher-observers was needed to contain and redirect the play. French, Pena & Holmes (1980) concluded that superhero play could not sustain itself as positive sociodramatic play free of adult intervention.

Sousa and Schneiderman (1986) have observed preschool age children playing superheroes. They question whether it is imaginative play or simply imitative play as children reinact short segments as seen on TV programs.

Jennings and Gillis-Olion (1980) requested that 65 kindergarten teachers observe their children playing during free play activities, recess/outdoor play activities and art activities and report the occurrence of behavior relating to television cartoons. The teachers' surveys showed that teachers believe the superfriends to be the favorite program of their children. Teachers' responses indicated that children do dramatize, discuss and reproduce in artwork the characters seen in television cartoons. Most cartoon related behaviors reported by teachers were observed during children's free play and discussions. Children appear to act like and talk about cartoon characters more than they draw them. Teacher comments indicated that teachers feel children are picking up negative values from television cartoons.

In a review of 42 studies with violent cartoons, Radecki (cited in National Coalition on Television Violence, Press Release: November 24, 1985) noted 39 of which reported some increase in hostile behavior in children after having viewed the cartoons. He further discusses a preliminary study of 20 preschoolers in which children playing with He-Man dolls were compared with those playing with Cabbage Patch dolls. He also compared children playing with Transformer dolls to those playing with Fraggle Rock dolls preceded by the cartoon programs. In both instances, twice the level of

hostile and anti-social behavior was noted when children were playing with the He-Man and Transformer dolls (Radecki, cited in National Coalition on Television Violence, Press Release: November 24, 1985).

In searching for positive benefits of superhero play, two general areas can be examined, the area of fantasy play and play fighting.

The benefits of fantasy play are theorized to be numerous. Fantasy play is believed to be a rich, personal, growth-inducing medium for young children. Many studies suggest that fantasy play may be linked to creativity, cognitive flexibility, divergent thinking and social understanding (Fein, 1981; Bretherton, 1981; Singer, 1977, 1973). Children's tendency to engage in imaginative play has been shown to correlate positively with measures of general people orientation, cooperation with adults and peers, friendliness and popularity with peers, general adjustment and use of language during play (Fein, 1981). Saltz, Dixson, & Johnson (1977) found that fantasy play experiences based on fairy tale themes possibly lead to even more complex play, cognitive development and impulse control than do more realistically-oriented, sociodramatic play experiences.

Aldis (1975) uses the term "play fighting" to describe the rough and tumble, horsing around play in which children chase, hit, kick and wrestle. He believes this play form is instinctive to children and asserts that it not only should be tolerated, but encouraged. This type of play enhances development of the nervous

system through the provision of vestibular stimulation. He further states that the approach and retreat format of play fighting provides opportunity for reciprocal "give and take" interaction between playmates. Di Pietro (1980) agrees that rough and tumble play may be conducive to social development in that it occurs between concenting, or at least tolerant, partners and necessitates a good deal of cooperation.

If adults can view superhero play as rich fantasy play and recognize the difference between disruptive, threatening and aggressive play and play fighting, then acceptance and encouragement of the play may be possible.

Kostelnik, Whiren and Stein (1986) make a case for accepting young children's superhero play. They argue that superheroes are appropriate models for exemplifying absolute good virtues. They are wise, fearless, clever and strong. Superhero themes of attack, capture, rescue, submit and flee are common themes observed in all types of children's dramatic play. The rough and tumble play engaged in mock battles is an important part of the daily activities of young children and, finally, physical skills are mastered as children jump off stairs and climb to high places.

Summary

Since approximately 1983, the increase in preschool age children playing superheroes, both at school and at home has been noted. Reports, articles, books and workshops have been produced to inform adults as to the appropriateness of the television programs and children's subsequent play. A significant portion of

the information advises parents and preschool teachers on "how to manage superhero play." The need to manage the play comes from its loud, disruptive and often aggressive outcomes.

The increase in superhero play coincides with the introduction of many new superhero television programs of the 1980's. The new superheroes retain some of the qualities of the 1940's superfriends. Like Superman, Batman, Wonderwoman and Captain America, the new superheroes are absolutely wise, fearless, clever and strong. They demonstrate incredible powers and can solve all problems. They know right from wrong and unwaveringly categorize deeds accordingly. They know few, if any, of the frustrations of ordinary mortals.

A close examination of the television programs also reveal high levels of violence, fearful scenarios, sexism and racism. Space technology predominates in weaponry and barren, dark other worlds are the battleground scenes. The "bad guys" are often grotesque mutants or robotic.

The main source of information about the hero is television reinforced with commercial action toys. The presentation mode for the programs is one of fast-paced advertising that catches and holds attention.

The fascination for the new hero does not appear to last into the middle school age years. Although parents report this age group watches the programs on television, they do not play superheroes.

To aid in making a decision about the appropriateness of children emulating superheroes, a historical review of children's heroes may provide yet another perspective. The next section of the review of literature will include information about traditional play types and how children in the early to middle 1900's played. The purpose of heroes will be discussed and the qualities of American heroes examined. Finally, comic book heroes from the 1940's through 1970's will be compared in relation to the new heroes.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Play Studies

Historically, stages of children's play have been conceptualized by leading psychologists of the child study movement of the late 1800's and early 1900's. Prior to 1880, Americans' seldom, if ever, thought of play as vital for the child's development (Cavallo, 1976). G. Stanley Hall revolutionized ideas about childhood and play. Hall succeeded by the mid-1890's in convincing a good portion of the educated public that the child developed sequentially, passing through definable stages of growth. Each stage of individual development was characterized by instincts that were inherited from a corresponding stage of a cultural organization. Joseph Lee expanded Hall's theory to impress upon society that the evolutionary advantage of a prolonged, segmental childhood development lay in almost limitless potential for social adaptability (Cavallo, 1976).

In 1961, Lee in his book Play In Education, isolated four major stages of play from infancy through adolescence. Lee's theory of play and defined play stages would serve as a prototype for play studies of the 1930's and 40's.

The first stage, "babyhood," lasted to the third year of life and was characterized by the desire to cling and manipulate objects, like sand and mud. The second stage, the "dramatic or imitative age," extended to about the sixth year. It was characterized by modeling significant adults in the child's life. The play forms dominant in this stage were creative dramatics, "ring games" and rhythmic songs and movement, all of which require some social cooperation. The third stage, the "Big-Injun" period began around the fifth year and terminated around the eleventh year. It was characterized by self-assertion, adventure play and gradually, toward the end of the period, immersion in the "real world." The forth stage, "adolescence," was dominated by a desire for social cooperation. Play forms included all those incorporating peers within an organized group setting. "Best friends" and "team experiences" were paramount.

Jean Piaget (1962), a leading 20th century cognitive theorist, explains stages of play in a manner that still resembles Lee's. In the infancy or sensorimotor stage, manipulation of objects is a primary play form that enables the child to learn about the world. In the preschool or preoperational stage, pretend play is a necessary ingredient for interchanging thought with others and coordinating internal relationships derived from opposing

viewpoints. In the middle childhood years or concrete operations stage, realistic organized games with rules are a major play form. Finally, in the adolescent or formal operations stage, the young adult has the mental capacity to closely simulate adult play activities.

By the 1940's, the importance of childhood as a state in and of itself and play as the "work" of childhood was established. The child studies movement of the 1930's and 40's brought about many new theories of child play, but all incorporated stages and definable types of play (Garvey, 1977; McLellan, 1970).

Lehman and Witty, in 1927, described categories of children's play and frequencies by age and sex. Their categories consisted of: 1) catching, throwing, kicking games; 2) chasing games; 3) hiding games; 4) jumping, hopping games; 5) singing ring games; 6) dramatization games; 7) following directions games; 8) table games; 9) very active games; 10) rather inactive play, and; 11) group games.

The results showed early and middle school age boys to prefer ball games, marbles and athletic contests. Girls preferred jacks, jump rope, school, house and singing games.

Foster, in 1930, used these same play categories and concluded that early and middle-school age children, both boys and girls, preferred outdoor over indoor games. Age differences showed dramatization and singing ring games dropping in popularity with age for both sexes, with hide and seek and chasing games remaining high in popularity at all ages and for both sexes. Games that

increased to a maximum between the ages of seven and eleven for both sexes were cops and robbers, hide and seek and tag. For boys, cowboys and Indians was a favorite game and for girls, jacks. The dramatization of house and school, while appearing frequently on lists for girls, were not present on any list for boys; on the other hand, basketball and volleyball were popular with boys, but did not appear on the girls' list.

Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1961) compared the results of four large-scale studies of children's game preferences in the years 1896, 1898, 1921 and 1959. Results gave evidence of increasing similarity between the sexes in game preferences. The increasing similarity between the sexes from 1898 to 1959 has been brought about more by changes in girls' play preferences than by change in those of boys. Boys tended to be stable in a high preference for make believe games in which two groups participate in dramatized conflict. In addition, boys were found to be consistent in following fantasy models, such as cowboys and Indians in their imitative play while girls were more consistent in following realistic models like nurses and mothers. Imitative games, such as playing school, house and store were ranked equally high for boys and girls in the late 1800's, but dropped to rankings of less than 50 in 1921 and to rankings of lower than 100 in 1959 for boys, while remaining consistently high for girls. For girls, Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg (1961) found that playing house moved down from seventh place in 1896 to twentieth place in 1959.

Recent studies of play types continue with the traditional themes of pretend games, physical play and ritualized and structured games. But one change in categorizing play has been the separation of pretend games into general make-believe play, family make-believe and heroic, adventurous play themes. The heroic, adventurous play category reflects the speculation of the influence of television on children's play. It is further subdivided to include the categories of: TV related fantastic characters; fantasy character roles; hero roles; aggressor roles in pretend play; and other TV character roles. In a study of 40 three and four year olds, Singer and Singer (1981) did find the influence of television on the content of children's imaginative play. The most frequent references to characters and adventures which occurred were drawn from TV shows, cartoons and fantasy-action shows. Although they found children engaging in a range of play types, they favored one or another of the play dimensions over a year's time. Generally, the results showed a decrease over the year in large motor activity and a significant increase in the direction of art play and ritual play or singing and dancing. The play themes associated with heroic, adventurous play showed a steady increase over the year. Almost all children showed some degree of adventurous game themes in play. Girls, as well as boys, engaged in superhero play. Girls also appeared to play family themes more significantly than did boys, but boys participated in superhero and adventure play only slightly more than did girls. It was observed that girls identified with female superheroines in their

make-believe play but would play at male superhero roles as well. Boys were not seen as moving any closer to playing family games than past studies have shown. Singer and Singer (1981) concluded that their data made it clear that television plays a major role in influencing the content of imaginative play of young children. Inherent in many adventure and fantasy situations were the underlying themes of power and danger.

Summary

Theories on children's play, past and present, point to modeling significant adults and dramatic imaginative play as important to the child between the years of approximately three through six. Somewhere around age five to approximately eleven, adventure dramatic play with team imposed rules becomes a primary play form. Dramatic play forms that have been significant in past years were house, school, store, nurse, cops and robbers and cowboys and Indians. There is some evidence that those play forms increased between the ages of seven to eleven and then diminished significantly. Boys have remained consistently high over the years in playing conflict dramatizations with adventure heroes. Girls have tended to play at more realistic, imaginative play forms such as mother, nurse and teacher. Recent studies show the preschool age child, both boys and girls, as playing adventure hero dramatizations.

Hero Play

What are the qualities of a hero and what role do heroes play in a child's life? Heroes are real or imagined figures who may possess the special qualities and abilities of strength, impressive size, courage, daring, power and effect. Heroes exert profound influence in individuals and even entire civilizations. Two major theories serve to explain the nature of this influence. Social learning theory sheds light on the relationship between the individual and his/her models. Jungian theory purports to explain the religious and mythical origins of the hero; the relationship between myths, dreams and fantasies; and the individual and societal purpose of the hero.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theorists propose that children learn by modeling what they see others do. Bandura (1977) suggest that learning can take place vicariously, without actual reinforcement. According to Bandura, a child learns from seeing or hearing a model because information gained in that manner might later be of use in fulfilling needs. In addition, the nature of the model appears to be an important factor in determining the extent to which a child will imitate that model. Bandura and Walters (1963) theorize that children are more likely to model their behavior after those people they regard as prestigious; they are more likely to model members of their own sex; they copy models who receive rewards; and children tend not to imitate persons who are punished for their behavior.

Jungian Theory

Jungian theory proposes a hero whose origins are rooted in the "collective unconscious" which consists of a universal, inexhaustible collection of archetypes from which dreams, myths, fairy tales, epics and dramas are drawn (Jacobi, 1959). Heroes, along with their myths and folklore, exist at all levels of civilization and in all parts of the world (Coffin & Cohen, 1978).

More recently, Elkind (1981), has attempted to explain children's interest in superheroes as their need to understand hierarchy of power. Children perceive themselves as powerless in relation to parents and other adults. But, superheroes are more powerful than the adults in children's lives.

Sousa and Schneiderman (1986) add to Elkind's theory of superhero emulation by stating that children are attracted to superheroes as they demonstrate control over a hostile environment. "They serve as models of the great power that the children are searching for" (Sousa & Schneiderman, 1986, p. 76).

Qualities of Heroes

Wecter (1965) asserts that American's choices of heroes have been prevailingly sound and worthy of our nation's pride. Character, hard work, tenacity, enterprise and firmness in the face of odds, rather than brains, eloquence or originality, are the most admired qualities of our heroes. The strong man, professional soldier or military victor have never been durable idols in the United States. The underdog and champion of "lost causes," on the other hand, may be admired. Wecter (1965) believes children's

first heroes are their parents and, later, heroes are doers of spectacular deeds.

Parsons (1986) proposes a strong link between heroic activity and the nature of the good citizen, especially in a North American democracy. He further states that democratic action is often connected to heroic, efficacious action. He theorizes that the United States is unique among nations in the high value placed on individual citizens and the opportunity for any citizen to use the power of his or her individual action to gain status, wealth, and/or prestige. These traditions give insight into both the nature of the American dream and the dreams of American children growing up.

Brown (1985) states that most middle-aged adults recall traditional images of heroes based on universally held standards of altruism, patriotism and unselfish behavior. Tucker (1985) says that in the past, children admired people who possessed honor, truth and bravery because parents and teachers saw to it that information about those who had done admirable deeds was passed on to children. Other past sources of information about heroes have been literature, movies and comic books (Parsons, 1986; Collins, 1985; Perigard, 1985; Lanyi, 1984).

Superhero Qualities

To be classified as a superhero, a personality must meet certain rigorous criteria. Rovin (1985) describes qualities that superheroes usually possess:

> Superheroes have at least one superpower, whether physical or attributable to a weapon, instrument, or conveyance; they work actively and magnanimously for the common good; their values are neither vindictive nor selfish; they tend to operate on earth, though they may not be from this world; they achieve anonymity by assuming a moral identity or alter ego; and they wear a distinctive costume (p. lx).

In a cross-generational study of comic book superheroes, Yarian (1974) compared superman comic book themes of the 1940's with those of the 1970's. Among the changes she found were: 1) An absence of nationalism and patriotism with more emphasis on individualism; 2) the lines between good and evil had blurred; 3) the hero and villain were both more omnipotent and the weapons they yielded were more destructive; 4) an increase in acts of aggression and a decrease in acts of punishment; and 5) an increase in power themes and competition.

Perigard (1985) states that during his childhood, comic book heroes demonstrated that good always triumphed over evil, playing fair was the only way to play. Comic book heroes won through brains and sheer force of their morality. Perigard (1985) and Englehart (Lanyi, 1985) agree that the 1940's was perhaps the last time the liens between right and wrong were clear cut. Modern comic book superheroes suffer from confusion about their roles and fight on the same level as the villain (Perigard, 1985; Lanyi, 1984; Yarian, 1974).

Sousa and Schneiderman (1986) question modern superheroes qualities as appropriate for children to emulate and dramatize. The "black and white," "right and wrong" values presented seem simplistic and unenlightened, even for preschool age children. The conflict resolution model is one of death, destruction, or mutilation of the "bad guys."

Summary

Traditional American heroes have exemplified qualities of honor, truth, bravery, enterprise and firmness in the face of odds. They may be an underdog but rarely a military victor. Brains, eloquence and creativity are not necessary "ingredients" for the "making of a hero."

Superheroes, with their qualities of incredible powers and absolute virtues do not seem to fit the typical American hero mold.

The popularity of superheroes with children may arise from children's need to model those in power; to understand hierarchy of power; or to feel vicariously good about the possibilities of control over a confusing world. On the other hand, the popularity of superheroes may be attributable to the skill of professional writers and programmers of television.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not the contemporary superhero children choose to emulate and dramatize in their fantasy play is qualitatively different from the hero(s) of past childhoods.

Specifically, the study provided data relating to the following questions:

--- Who were children's heroes and models of past childhoods?

--- What qualities did these models exemplify?

--- What ages preferred dramatizing hero play?

--- What specific social forces influenced the choices and qualities of heroes?

Data collection consisted of a current review of the literature on superhero programs and play; a historical review of the literature on children's play forms and heroes from approximately 1900 to 1975; and a questionnaire on how present adults, age 17 to 80, played as children.

The current and historical review of the literature will be discussed as it relates to the questions in the results and discussion sections.

This section will describe the survey questionnaire on how present adults played as children.

Subjects

The subjects for the study were a stratified sample population representing five designated time periods in the twentieth century. Each of the time periods chosen was 14 years apart and was significant for some particular social phenomena: war; space technology; advent of television in the home; the depression. Subjects were recruited from high schools, universities, neighborhoods and senior citizen homes to match the designated age period. A total of 200 subjects completed the survey questionnaire

and were randomized to 100 with 20 in each of the time periods, 10 male and 10 female. The stratified sample procedure can be represented with the following chart:

ERA	Space Technology Viet Nam	Advent of TV	WW II	Depression	WW I
Year	1973	1959	1945	1931	1917
Age as Adult	17-23	31-37	45-51	59-65	73-79
Age as Child	4-10	4-10	4-10	4-10	4-10

The subjects were Caucasian and predominantly middle class. Sixty-eight percent reported they were "comfortable" as children; 22%, "poor"; and 8%, "well-off." In the age category of 59-65 year olds, who were children during the depression, 65% reported they were "poor." The majority of the population lived in the north-west United States as children. The mid-west and south-west were the next highest frequencies. Forty-three percent of the respondents lived in the country as children; 34% in town; and 21% in cities. The average number of children per family was: 3.25 for the 17-23 age group; 3.75 for the 31-37 age group; 4.1 for the 45-51 age group; 5.0 for the 59-65 age group; and 5.5 for the 73-79 age group.

Instrument and Procedures

Subjects were asked to report from memory how they played as children. They described, in essay format, a salient episode of play in their early childhood (4, 5, 6) and middle childhood

(7, 8, 9) years. They were encouraged to consider the elements of where they played; with whom; what characters they were; what the action was; what toys and props were used; and how long the play lasted.

They then recorded major play themes from a list of choices. From that list, they recorded key characters they played and the source of knowledge about the character. Finally, they described qualities of their favorite characters.

Example:

Theme:	Store
Character:	Store Clerk
Source:	"Going to town" - direct experience
Qualities:	Helpful, honest

The term "character" was used in the instrument rather than "hero" because it was thought that the term hero might be defined too narrowly by subjects and preclude certain "real people" hero types.

After piloting the questionnaire, it was determined that a group process was needed to help people remember childhood play, especially the early years. Groups of 10 to 20 were divided into small groups of three to four people. They then were encouraged to either make a list of all the toys they had as a child, or begin by discussing their most remembered ways of playing. The group process brought out a lot of discussion on play and, in that way,

"jogged" memories. After switching groups for more discussion, the subjects then filled out the questionnaire.

In working with the older subjects in nursing homes, undergraduate and graduate students visited with them at length about their childhood before filling out the questionnaire. It was observed that these "senior" citizens could remember a lot of detail about the way in which they played. Approximately 25% of the questionnaires handed out were returned incomplete or subjects reported that they, "Just could not remember." These subjects were deleted from the study.

An analysis of the play episodes was completed by two graduate students who were familiar with types of dramatic play. Singer and Singer's (1981) seven play categories were used to analyze the salient play episodes. The seven categories are outlined in the following chart:

1) Heroic, Adventurous Play Themes
   - TV-Related Fantastic Characters
   - Fantasy Character Roles
   - Hero Roles
   - Aggressor Roles in Pretend Play
   - TV Character Roles
2) Family Pretend Games
   - Dolls
   - Dress-up Clothes
   - Family Games
   - Mother Roles

Father Roles

Baby Roles

3) Gross Physical vs Artistic Play

Physical-Motor Play

Art Forms and Drawing

Exercise Toys

Art Supplies Used

4) General Make-Believe Play Styles

Make-Believe Play

Miniature Toys Used

Occupations (doctor, nurse, fireman, postman)

Adventure (more realistic)

5) Ritualized and Structured Play

Ritual Play

Language Play

Dancing and Singing

Frames and Puzzles

Animal Roles (large, fierce)

6) Animal-Oriented Games

Materials: Stuffed Animals

Animal Games (small, cuddly)

Animal (small or pet)

7) Rules Games and Fearful Themes

Games with Roles

Victim Role in Pretend Games

Separation Fears, Death, Rejection

Dangers (disasters, monsters)

Percentage of interrater agreement in categorizing the play episodes indicates a reliability measure of .88. When subjects reported on more than one play type, the first one only was categorized on the assumption that the first one was possibly the most typical, therefore, remembered first.

Analysis of the data was completed with x^2 and post hoc test of proportions at the .05 level of significance. Additional data are presented with descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

Analysis of the data from the survey questionnaire on how children of past childhoods played and who their favorite characters were revealed significant findings at the early childhood level (4, 5, 6 year), but not the middle childhood level (8, 9, 10 year). Significant differences were found between post- and pre-TV age groups in heroic adventure play, fantasy heroes, real life heroes and sources of information about heroes.

The first analysis focused on the question, "Who were children's heroes and models of past childhoods?" Data on favorite characters were collected from examining responses to primary play themes and favorite characters within the play themes.

Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of key play themes in early and middle childhood over the collective age groups (17 to 79 years old). Both early and middle childhood groups report modal frequencies of salient play episodes to be in the general make-believe category (34% and 37%, respectively) as contrasted to

heroic adventure (19% and 20%). Table 2 reports favorite characters dramatized in play. It appears that both early and middle childhood categories preferred to dramatize a fantasy hero (42% and 47%, respectively). Younger children showed nearly as high a preference for dramatizing a family member, while preference in the middle childhood group was more equally spread among other character types.

Table 1
Percentage Distribution of Salient Play Episode

	Heroic Adv.	Family Pretend	Physical vs Artistic	General Make-Believe	Ritual or Structured	Animal Games	Rules, Fearful Themes
Early:	19	22	19	34*	2	2	2
Middle:	20	11	12	37*	14	2	3

*Mode

Table 2
Percentage Distribution of Favorite Character Dramatized in Play

	Fantasy Hero	Real Life Hero	Personal Acquaintance	Family Member	Non-Human Character
Early:	42*	16	4	35	2
Middle:	47*	28	6	17	2

*Mode

In analyzing play themes by age group, Table 3 shows the highest percentage of preference for heroic adventure play appears in early childhood at the 17 and 23 year old group (52.6%). The percentage for the same age group remains higher in middle childhood (35.0%) than other forms of play.

Family pretend in early childhood is lower for the first two age groups (13.6% and 13.6%, respectively) than for the last three age groups (27.3%, 22.7%, 22.7%). In middle childhood, family pretend is higher in the first age group than in the rest of the age groups (27.3% as compared to 18.2%).

The literature reports a preponderance of family and general make-believe in early childhood, historically and more recently, with family pretend phasing out in middle childhood. Adventure themes are thought to increase in middle childhood (Lehman and Witty, 1927; Foster, 1930; Sutton-Smith, 1961; Singer & Singer, 1981).

Table 3
Percentage Distribution of Early and Middle Childhood Salient Play by Age Group

		17-23	31-37	45-51	59-65	73-79	Count
Heroic Adventure	EC:	52.6	21.1	15.8	5.3	5.3	19
	MC:	35.0	15.0	20.0	20.0	10.0	20
Family Pretend	EC:	13.6	13.6	27.3	22.7	22.7	22
	MC:	27.3	18.2	18.2	18.2	18.2	11
Physical vs Artistic	EC:	5.3	26.3	10.5	31.6	26.3	19
	MC:	8.3	25.0	25.0	8.3	33.3	12
General Make-Believe	EC:	14.7	23.5	23.5	20.6	17.6	34
	MC:	18.9	16.2	24.3	21.6	18.9	37
Ritual or Structured	EC:	50.0	----	50.0	----	----	2
	MC:	----	28.6	14.3	28.6	28.6	14
Animal Games	EC:	----	----	----	----	100.0	2
	MC:	50.0	50.0	----	----	----	2
Rules, Fearful, Themes	EC:	----	----	----	50.0	50.0	2
	MC:	33.3	33.3	----	----	33.3	3

Table 4 shows early and middle childhood favorite characters dramatized in play by age groups. The highest percentage of preference for dramatizing fantasy heroes appears in the 17 to 23 year old group in both early and middle childhood (28.6% and 23.4%, respectively). Family members as heroes drops to 14.3% for the early childhood 17 to 23 year old group, but is 17.6% for the middle childhood group. Dramatizing real life heroes appears high for the early childhood 59 to 65 year olds and 73 to 79 year olds (31.3% and 37.5%, respectively). In middle childhood, the real life hero is high for 45 to 51 year olds (25.0%) and 73 to 79 year olds (25.0%). Personal acquaintances are high for the 59 to 65 year olds (50.0%).

Historically, children were thought to learn about real life heroes from parents and teachers (Tucker, 1985). Perhaps these figures reflect that to be the case as real life heroes and personal acquaintances were dramatized somewhat more in the age groups of 59 to 79 year olds.

Table 4
Percentage Distribution of Early and Middle Childhood Favorite Character by Age Group

		17-23	31-37	45-51	59-65	73-79	Count
Fantasy Hero	EC:	28.6	23.8	21.4	14.3	11.9	42
	MC:	23.4	21.3	19.1	21.3	14.9	47
Real Life Hero	EC:	6.3	6.3	18.8	31.3	37.5	16
	MC:	17.9	17.9	25.0	18.2	25.0	28
Personal Acquaintance	EC:	25.0	25.0	25.0	25.0	----	4
	MC:	16.7	16.7	16.7	50.0	----	6
Family Member	EC:	14.3	20.0	20.0	20.0	25.7	9
	MC:	17.6	17.6	11.8	17.6	35.3	17
Non-Human Character	EC:	50.0	50.0	----	----	----	2
	MC:	----	50.0	50.0	----	----	2

In order to test for significant differences in play types and characters and examine television as a determining social force in children's choice of heroes, age categories were collapsed to include pre-television age groups (45 to 51, 59 to 65, 73 to 79) and post-television age groups (17 to 23, 31 to 37). An independent samples chi-square analysis was performed investigating the differences in salient play types and post- and pre-TV age groups (Table 5). The chi-square value was significant ($x^2 = 12.4$, $df = 4$, $p < .01$). A post hoc test of proportions showed

significant differences at the heroic adventure play level between post- and pre-TV groups (2 = 3.33, $p < .05$, 2-tailed). More adults in the age categories of 17 to 23 and 31 to 37 reported playing heroic adventure themes than did adults in the pre-TV age groups of 45 to 51, 59 to 65 and 73 to 79.

No significant differences were found in middle childhood salient play and post- and pre-TV groups.

Table 5
Early Childhood Salient Play by Post- and Pre-TV Age Group

	Heroic Adventure	Family Pretend	Physical vs Artistic	General	Other	
Post-TV	14(7.6)*	6(8.8)	6(7.6)	13(13.6)	1(2.4)	40
Pre-TV	5(11.4)*	16(13.2)	13(11.4)	21(20.4)	5(3.6)	60
	19	22	19	34	6	

$x^2 = 12.4$
$df = 4$
$p < .01$

In examining favorite characters dramatized in play, again, significant differences were found in the early childhood years in the post- and pre-TV age groups, but not in middle childhood. Table 6 reports the chi-square values and shows a significant difference in favorite characters dramatized in play in the early childhood years between post- and pre-TV groups ($x^2 = 11.3$), $df = 4$, $p < .02$). Further analysis with test of proportions showed significant differences in post- and pre-TV groups in preference for hero types ($z = 2.08$, $p < .05$, 2-tailed). More adults in the

post-TV ages (17 to 23, 31 to 37) reported fantasy heroes as their favorite hero in early childhood then did the pre-TV age groups. A significant negative z value was found with post-TV age groups choosing real life characters as heroes ($z = -2.48$, $p < .05$, 2-tailed). It seems (as though) there is an interaction of fantasy heroes rising in popularity and real life heroes dropping in popularity with young children since the 1950's.

Table 6
Early Childhood Favorite Character by Post- and Pre-TV Age Groups

	Fantasy Hero	Real Life Hero	Personal Acquaintance	Family Member	Non-Human Character	
Post-TV	20(17.0)*	2(6.5)*	2(1.6)	12(14.1)	2(.8)	40
Pre-TV	20(25.0)*	14(9.5)*	2(2.4)	23(20.9)	0(1.2)	59
	42	16	4	35	2	

$x^2 = 11.3$
$df = 4$
$p < .02$

A look at source of information about heroes may provide more data on social forces that have affected children's hero choices. Chi-square for independent samples was performed investigating the differences in post- and pre-TV age groups and their source of information about reported early and middle childhood heroes.

Significant differences were found at the early childhood level (Table 7), but not at the middle childhood level ($x^2 = 12.8$, $df = 4$, $p < .01$). Post hoc test of proportions showed a significant increase in media, including television, as a first source of information about heroes in the post-TV age group ($z = 2.38$,

$p < .05$, 2-tailed). Accordingly, z values show a significant decrease in friends/siblings and parents' occupation as first sources of information about heroes ($z = -2.27$, $p < .05$, 2-tailed; $z = -1.97$, $p < .05$, 2-tailed, respectively). As media has increased this role in providing information about heroes to young children, friends, siblings and parents have decreased their role. As television is included in media as a source of information about young children's heroes, this study confirms other studies about the influence of television on children's dramatic play (Singer and Singer, 1981).

Table 7
Early Childhood Source of Information About Favorite Character by Post- and Pre-TV Age Groups

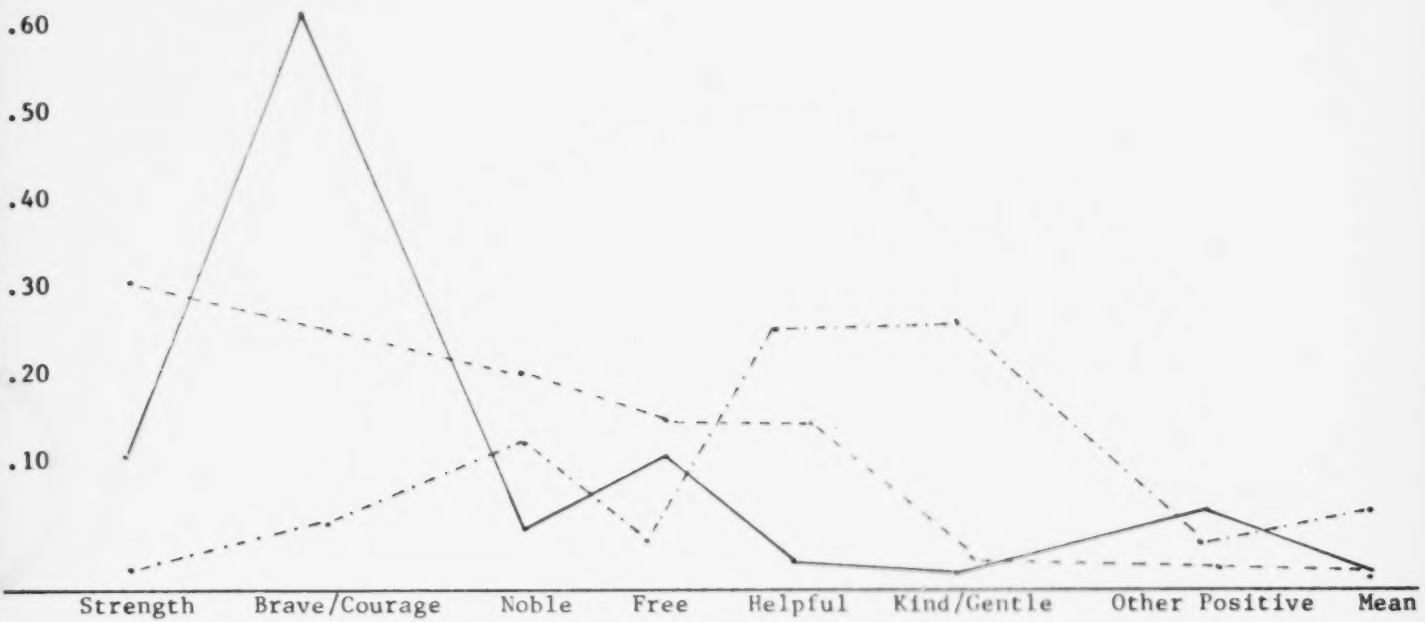
	Media Incl.TV	Direct Exp.	Friends/ Siblings	Parents' Occup.	Other	
Post-TV	21(15.4)*	13(11.7)	3(7.3)*	2(5.3)*	1(.4)	40
Pre-TV	17(22.6)	16(17.3)	15(10.7)	11(7.7)	0(.6)	59
	38	29	18	13	1	

$x^2 = 12.8$
$df = 4$
$p < .01$

A final analysis of the data gives information about the qualities of heroes children choose to emulate and dramatize in their play. Although no significant differences were found in qualities of heroes, a descriptive analysis shows some possible trends. In early childhood, where significantly more fantasy heroes were identified as favorite characters, 61.9% selected "brave" and "courage" as the salient quality (Table 8). In

contrast, the qualities of the early childhood real life hero, whose influence on children's play was found to decrease significantly in the post-TV groups, are more evenly distributed across a variety of qualities. The family member, whose popularity as an early childhood favorite character, has also dropped somewhat in the post-TV groups, shows the widest distribution of qualities. The fewer descriptors given to the fantasy hero may correspond to the narrow and stereotypic qualities of the modern superheroes on

Table 8
Percentage Distribution of Qualities of Favorite Character in Early Childhood



_____ Fantasy Hero

--------- Real Life Hero

-.-.-.-.- Family Member

television. The data also suggest that young children do not see fantasy heroes as particularly helpful, kind, or gentle.

DISCUSSION

The 1980's has brought about a change in the way preschool age children play. Superheroes, such as He-Man, G.I. Joe and Transformers represent new futuristic models for children to emulate and dramatize in play. Adults question the value of the new heroes as they observe children playing stereotypic and aggressive roles that imitate television superhero episodes. Parents and educators question the ethics of the television industry with the commercialization of the superhero action toys on each program. Still the question persists--Is this play really any different from the way adults used to play?

This study sheds some light on changes in children's play and favorite characters over the years. Historically, preschool age children were noted as playing dramatic roles they were close to and desired to model. Most often, these models were family members and other "real" people of the community--teachers, store clerks, firemen, nurses, etc. (Lowenfeld, 1935; Hartly, Frank & Goldenson, 1952; Caplan & Caplan, 1973; Singer & Singer, 1981). In middle childhood, after approximately age eight, children moved from modeling known, predictable people to playing out adventure themes with more distant, fantasy characters--cowboys, army, cops and robbers, etc. (Foster, 1930; Caplan & Caplan, 1973; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg; 1961).

If young children are seen as emulating and dramatizing the more fantastic hero, as this study indicates, are they not at risk

in making contact with their environment? Will the modern superheroes, with their qualities of strength, daring and power, help a young child understand the wide range of qualities of real adult models? Is television, with its expert writers and programmers, creating an artificial hero phenomenon that is out of line with natural development for children? Are adults vicariously "playing" themselves with an unknown space future by allowing their children to purchase and play with futuristic technology toys? Just as war toys have appeared at key times throughout history (Andreas, 1969), space technology toys may be on the market now for reasons, the least of which is that they are developmentally appropriate play items for children.

Continued research is needed on the appropriateness of modern superheroes as models for young children. More studies observing children playing superheroes are needed to determine degrees and amount of aggressive versus prosocial behaviors exhibited; rich sustaining fantasy play versus imitative television reinactments; and variety of other real people characters dramatized in play.

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